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## Towards Resolving Chaos in the e-Book Supply Chain

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## TOWARDS RESOLVING CHAOS IN THE E-BOOK SUPPLY CHAIN

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### Abstract

*Whether and how the ISBN should identify each different version of an e-book is becoming a contentious issue. There seems to be a huge mismatch between how publishers are identifying and describing e-books and what libraries actually require.*

*In this session, Ann-Marie Breaux of YBP, Brian Green of the International ISBN Agency and Mark Bide of EDItEUR will look at library requirements for e-book identification and metadata and discuss the options for dealing with discovery, acquisition and usage reporting in this developing supply chain. They will also explain the importance of other new identifiers that can help make sense of the e-book supply chain chaos. This is a unique opportunity for all interested in e-books to tell key players what their requirements are and influence how they can best be met.*

### ISBN background

Since its creation in the late 1960s the purpose of the ISBN has been to facilitate the supply chain and enable new business models. In the digital environment, it has become less clear how the supply chain will develop and, because of that, how the ISBN will be used as a facilitator.

One of the principles of ISBN has been that it identifies a unique product (e.g. edition of a book). This has facilitated discovery and acquisitions and enabled e-commerce, aggregation of product information and sales data reporting. The ISBN standard, ISO 2108, has always required that different product forms of a publication, where these are made separately available, be assigned separate ISBNs.

When the standard was revised in 2005, there was considerable discussion about the appropriate level of granularity for electronic publications. It was agreed that the same rules that had been applied to printed books should also apply to ebooks and the current edition of ISO 2108, the ISBN standard, therefore reads:

*“Each different format of an electronic publication (e.g. „lit’, „pdf’, „html’, „pdb’) that is published and made separately available shall be given a separate ISBN.”*

Although this seemed a sensible level of granularity at the time, it now seems that this level is insufficiently fine for some libraries, booksellers, jobbers/wholesalers and too fine for some publishers. In any case, file format does not seem to be a useful distinction as retailers, libraries and their suppliers are more concerned with versions from specific platforms (typically a combination of file format and DRM proprietary to that platform).

### The problem

In the traditional printed book supply chains, books were assigned ISBNs “at birth” and the same product with the same identifier progressed through the supply chain from printer to distributor to wholesaler to retailer or library.

The e-book supply chains are different. Publishers often produce a single generic file (typically .epub or .pdf) which is sent to an aggregator or service provider for conversion into different

formats (standard or platform-specific), addition of proprietary DRM etc. These files are then made available from a number of different sources (publisher's website, library or trade e-book platform, jobber/wholesaler, retailer). The result is a number of different versions of the e-book, many of them with unique characteristics and functionality, which retailers, libraries (and suppliers to both) need to be able to identify, preferably with a standard identifier, for the purposes of discovery and/or e-commerce.

However, many publishers do not wish to undertake the considerable burden and cost of assigning ISBNs to and creating and maintaining metadata for each of these versions. They believe that the sales channels can use proprietary identifiers downstream and that ISBNs are no longer necessary other than to identify the generic digital file in their own systems.

Some publishers have argued that they only publish one generic format (e.g. .epub) and assign an ISBN to that and that any other formats or platform-specific versions are provided by third party intermediaries and are not therefore the publishers' responsibility.

A result of this has been a proliferation of non-standard identifiers from channels and other intermediaries. In some cases, quasi-ISBNs have been assigned by intermediaries in an attempt to satisfy the demands of their customers. These quasi-ISBNs have duplicated legitimately assigned ISBNs, leading to considerable confusion in the market.

### **Who assigns what identifier?**

The International ISBN Agency continues to recommend that the publisher should assign ISBNs to each product separately available. (A guiding principle is that a product needs a separate identifier if the supply chain needs to separately identify it). Downstream intermediaries and channels should obtain these ISBNs for their various formats platforms from the original publisher.

However, following the reluctance of some publishers to assign ISBNs to each format, and demand from intermediaries and their customers to have them, the International ISBN Agency issued a guideline in April 2008 allowing ISBNs to be assigned by e-book resellers, under strict conditions, where publishers will not provide their own ISBNs for this purpose.

This situation is far from ideal but provided a solution for customers who required a unique and valid ISBN for each product where one was not available from the publisher. It was stressed that a publisher's ISBN was preferable and that third parties should always attempt to obtain an ISBN from the publisher before assigning their own.

In other cases, intermediaries have used the ISBN provided by the publisher (identifying a generic ebook file or, in some cases, even a print edition) but identified platforms through the use of codes for each platform as a metadata element. This solution could work if the platform codes were standardised, but would be similar to the old practice of quoting an ISBN assigned to a hardback but saying in metadata that the product is actually a paperback. It would involve an extra level of processing as ISBNs on their own would not uniquely identify the product.

### **Problems for publishers**

A survey of participants during a recent BISG webcast on the subject of e-book identification noted that the major obstacles to publishers assigning separate ISBNs to each e-book version were "metadata bloat" and "current workflow" practice. Some publishers have queried the need for separate identification, using standard identifiers, of different e-book versions.

**What do libraries need?**

In order to formulate and promote new guidelines for the assignment of ISBNs to e-books, the International ISBN Agency needs to understand the requirements of the market. This session stimulated considerable discussion, demonstrating that librarians require both separate ISBNs for different formats (e.g. for acquisition purposes) and a generic “e-isbn” linking all ebook versions for the purpose of open link resolution. To avoid category errors and confusion, however, it is essential that ISBNs are assigned only at the individual product level. A new identifier at the generic ebook level is therefore probably required.